

Primary: Sector braced for Alexander report



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Three-year study expected to call for reform of testing and teacher training

Original paper headline: Primary sector braced for Alexander report

The long-awaited Cambridge Primary Review, the biggest investigation into pre-11 schooling since the famous Plowden report, is due to be published next week.

The review is the result of a three-year independent investigation led by Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, which has looked into all aspects of primary education.

It is believed that it calls for a change to the testing system, more freedom for teachers to work with their communities to provide learning rooted in their pupils' own experiences, and a reform of the teacher training system.

One of Professor Alexander's earlier recommendations - the dismantling of the National Strategies - has already been taken up.

Among the most valuable aspects of the report will be its overview of what is happening in the 17,000 primary schools in England.

The team's interim report, published two years ago, came six months after children's charity Unicef placed Britain at the bottom of a survey of 21 countries for children's happiness. British children had the poorest relationships with family and friends and the riskiest behaviour when it came to drink, drugs and sex, Unicef found.

But the initial finding of the review was that primary schools were not unhappy places, but seen as havens from an increasingly materialistic adult world that parents were anxious about.

That did not mean change was not needed, and within primary schools the issue that the review identified as one of the most pressing was the current testing system.

The initial critique found that children's reading standards have barely improved in 55 years, as teachers have been encouraged to teach to test rather than deepen understanding.

Professor Alexander stated: "It is hard to resist the view that sooner rather than later the apparatus of national testing must change radically and we should have very different views of classroom assessment and what 'standards' the primary stage should entail."

The study was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and has been touted as the successor to the 1967 Plowden report, *Children and their Primary Schools*. The Plowden report advocated child-centered learning with its assertion that "at the heart of the educational process lies the child".

Professor Alexander was one of the "three wise men", along with Sir Jim Rose and Chris Woodhead, whose report in 1991 led to a decline in cross-curricular teaching and the rise of subject-based teaching in

primaries.

Sir Jim has recently reviewed the primary curriculum for the Government. His recommendations - to rearrange the national curriculum into six areas of learning and emphasise six core skills: numeracy, literacy, ICT, social, thinking and emotional - are likely to be endorsed later this term as the basis of a new national curriculum.

Up for review

- The Cambridge Primary Review (www.primaryreview.org.uk) was launched in October 2006.
- It is directed by Professor Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge.
- The Cambridge team is supported by 60 researchers, a 21-strong advisory committee chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, and a management group led by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.
- The review has published 28 surveys, a report on community consultation and a special report on the curriculum.
- The final report, *Children, their World, their Education*, is being published by Routledge, £35.
- This is to be followed by 13 regional conferences. There will then be a concluding conference in Cambridge in February 2010.

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